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Lecture 24: Freedom Crashed Down on Me

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"FREEDOM CRASHED DOWN ON ME"

Carol A. O'Connor

Twenty-Fourth Annual Last Lecture

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PROLOGUE

Although I am very pleased that the selection committee chose me to give "The Last Lecture," I find it a little awkward to acknowledge that in this, the closing year of the twentieth century, I am the first woman to receive this honor. Of course, I have other "first woman" designations to my credit. What woman wouldn't, who, in 1967, entered a Ph. D. program in a field dominated by men? In my second year of graduate school, I was the first woman selected as a freshman counselor for the first undergraduate class to include women in the entire 268-year history of Yale College. (The graduate and professional schools at Yale had been accepting women, albeit only a few of us, through most of the twentieth century.) In 1974, when Knox College in Illinois hired me to teach history, I became the first woman to do so, this at a school where women had been studying for 130 years. In 1980 I was the first woman tenured in the Department of History, then the Department of History and Geography, here at Utah State. In 1986, I became the first active woman faculty member promoted to the rank of full professor in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. And finally my favorite claim to fame though one for which it's difficult to secure confirmation: I was the first, and may have been clear down to the present, the only pregnant full professor in the history of Utah State University. In 1987, I gave birth to a wonderful son, who joined his vivacious older sister in distracting me
from the demands of my profession.

Nevertheless, those of us who joined the faculty at Utah State in the 1970s and early 80s know that an important group of women charted the course ahead of us. Of the greatest significance for me were Karen Morse and Alison Thorne. Karen, a Ph. D. in chemistry from the University of Michigan, first came to Utah State when her husband Joe, also a Ph. D. in chemistry from the University of Michigan, received a tenure-track faculty position here in 1968. He got the assistant professor job. She got the cobbled-together, part-time, temporary, acting instructor job. But soon enough she too was working for tenure, even though, as the mother of two small boys she continued to teach part-time. In 1976, while still a part-timer, she was tenured and promoted. Then in the 1980s she leaped a number of hurdles. She became the head of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, got promoted to full professor, became the dean of the College of Science, and, in 1989, was appointed provost here at Utah State University. Did I forget to mention? She was no longer employed part-time. Today Karen Morse is the president of Western Washington University in Bellingham, applying the skills she learned here to doing a great job there.

Like Karen and Joe Morse, Alison Thorne and her husband Wynne both received doctoral degrees from the same institution. Wynne earned a Ph. D. in soil science and Alison, at the tender age of 24, a Ph. D. in consumption economics from Iowa State. As with the Morses, so with the Thornes: when Utah State came calling, it was Wynne who got the offer. He became associate professor of agronomy, department head, director of the agricultural experiment station, and USU's first vice-president for research. Wynne wrote a lot and traveled extensively. But for Alison, for a quarter of a century, there was no job at Utah State, cobbled together or otherwise. You see, Alison and Wynne arrived at USU in 1939, three years after the university "abruptly
terminated" the last two faculty women whose husbands held faculty positions as well. Not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would the anti-nepotism policies of the Great Depression get rescinded.

Long a force in the Logan community, where she raised five children, Alison became a significant presence on campus from the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s. The most powerful individual ever to hold the rank of lecturer, a rank she held for 20 years, she was promoted to professor emerita in 1985. That year too she was chosen to give the Faculty Honor Lecture. I was there in the audience as she spoke in her clear, down-to-earth, land-grant manner. She spoke about all the women who historically had played a role at colleges like Utah State -- the teachers, the students, the staff, the faculty wives, even the male students' wives and mothers. Together they constituted "The Visible and Invisible Women" of the campus community. Rarely have I felt prouder to be here at Utah State than when I listened to Alison speak that night.

In 1985, 14 years ago, it was big news that a woman, Alison Thorne, was giving the Faculty Honor Lecture, even though, as her talk informed us, she wasn't the first woman to do so. (It was Almeda Perry Brown who gave the Third Faculty Honor Lecture in 1944. It was entitled "Nutritional Status of Some Utah Population Groups."). In 1999 it should NOT be noteworthy that a woman is giving the Last Lecture. That no woman was selected before me I regard as a fluke, an unintended result of the selection process. Departmental, college, university-wide, and even national teaching awards have acknowledged the excellence that my current female colleagues bring to the classroom.

So I'll accept this last of my firsts, not so much as a belated compliment to my gender, but as timely recognition for my efforts as a teacher. I'll let Alison Thorne's lecture stand as my testament to the history of women at Utah State University. And I shall speak to you, students,
as you instructed me to do, not from a scholarly perspective but from my personal insight and experience. As I do so, I think you'll come to understand why standing here giving this lecture means so very much to me.

I wish to take you back to an earlier time and to another part of the country, the suburbs of New York City in the early 1960s. It was a Leave-It-to-Beaver kind of place where boys were expected to be boys, girls were required to be young ladies, fathers knew best, and mothers stayed home. My town included a rich mix of Catholics, Jews, and all sorts of Protestants, but rarely did I see a non-white face unless I counted the black women who slipped into town to clean houses and the black men who showed up to mow lawns. My parents didn't have to tell me: these people didn't "belong" in my town.

In my family's livingroom at night, the news flashed images of black/white clashes at lunch counters, bus stations, and segregated schools. The problems of the South seemed far away. In the streets in a city on the other side of the world, Buddhist monks set fire to themselves. The monks were protesting the policies of a government that the United States supported. Their deaths shocked and repelled me. But South Vietnam was even farther away than places like Arkansas, Alabama, and Mississippi. I did worry about one thing: the nuclear warheads that the Russians had. I knew that several had to be aimed right at the heart of the nation's largest metropolis. Living on the outskirts of New York, I recognized that one blast could destroy everyone and everything I knew.
In the early 1960s I pledged allegiance to "one nation, under God, indivisible." I went to church every Sunday and even in between. I believed almost everything everyone expected me to believe. And then I went to college.

I found college profoundly unsettling. What I learned there led me to question my country, my church, my future. Neither my parents nor I anticipated this result. My parents, who graduated from high school into the harsh realities of the Great Depression, looked on college as a ticket to a better job or, in my case, to a well-paid husband. Going to college, in their view, didn't necessarily make you smarter. It made you smoother. It was an essential element in that constellation of factors which enhanced one's social status in our presumably classless society. For me, growing up where and when I did, you weren't "accepted" if you didn't go to college. I went.

Going to college was so automatic that I didn't pay as much attention as I should have to where I went. In the northeastern part of the country at that time, the most prestigious schools were single-sex liberal arts institutions. I dreamed of attending one of the Seven Sister schools, the women's version of the Ivy League. In the end, I never applied. I so desperately wanted out of high school, out of that mindless wasteland of silly, self-absorbed girls and limited teachers, that I jumped at the chance one college offered when it received my SAT scores. I finished my junior year of high school and entered my freshman year in college.

On the face of it, my decision was stupid. The institution I left was a private Catholic girls' school. The one I entered had a larger student body -- nearly 1,000 students instead of 360 -- but it drew from an even narrower segment of society. It was for rich, young, Catholic women, predominantly of Irish extraction. If you wanted Catholicism with an elitist twist, you went to Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart. Barbara Boggs, the daughter of
Congressman Hale Boggs of Louisiana, was just finishing a term as the student body president there. More to the point, Manhattanville boasted an unsurpassed array of alumnae with connections to the Kennedy family. Rose the matriarch; sisters Kathleen, Eunice, and Jean; Ethel, Bobby Kennedy's wife, and Joan, Ted Kennedy's wife, all had attended my college. As I entered Manhattanville in the fall of 1963, John F. Kennedy seemed secure in the White House, and Irish Catholics appeared, at last, to have won full acceptance in American society. Who would have guessed that my years at this school would provide so many challenges to the assumptions of my culture?

The first challenge came not from events that occurred at my school but beyond it. On a Friday afternoon, ten weeks into my Manhattanville career, while I was plugging away in the bowels of the library repairing the broken spines on books, a co-worker came to tell me, "The President's been shot." His death shocked the entire nation, but it hit my schoolmates and me especially hard. Only a month earlier the president's sister Eunice and her husband, the founding director of the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver, had graced our college with their presence. We, students at Manhattanville, fawned over them. We heeded their inspiring words, admired their athletic bodies, and wondered where they got those tans. We wanted to be good and powerful and beautiful people just like they were. But now the era of Camelot was over.

In the months after the president's murder, it would have been tempting for us to retreat from the crises that were beginning to engulf America, into the comfort zone that existed within the cement walls encircling our lush campus. Our teachers wouldn't let us do that, however. The very homogeneity of Manhattanville's student body made us easy targets for enlightenment.

One teacher who enlightened us was David Dilworth. In what was ostensibly a course on ancient philosophy (the assigned reading included Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, and
Plotinus), we learned about contemporary society. A shy man who avoided eye contact with his students, Mr. Dilworth saw through our cultural blinders. Don't blame the South for the president's death, he said. The towns you live in and the college you attend are just as class-and-race-segregated as any part of the South. Then he hit us where our hopes lay: You all can't wait until you get out of here, marry well, and enter the exclusive ranks of organizations like the Junior League. Don't set your sights on the Junior League. Do something good for this country. You should join the Urban League.

Dilworth's message was reinforced in a few of my other courses. From John McDermott, a sociologist, I learned that we Americans used to assume that we had the most perfect society in the world; but, now that Lyndon Johnson was winning congressional approval for and even enlarging on many of Kennedy's plans, we might at long last bring the realities of American society into line with its ideals. Transferring our loyalties from the urbane and articulate Kennedy to the uncouth Texan with the Southern drawl wasn't easy. But Johnson's reform-oriented Great Society programs captured our imagination.

Dilworth and McDermott didn't have to subvert our comfortable middle-class world on the sly. The administration clearly supported their efforts. In 1965 our white women's campus community gathered to confer an honorary degree on a black man, Roy Wilkins, the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. A year earlier we heard from another outside speaker, William Sloane Coffin. The official chaplain at Yale University, Coffin, a white man, had joined the freedom rides of the early 1960s and was intimately involved with the civil rights movement. In his talk at Manhattanville, which 35 years later I still remember well, he dared to attack one of the most intense taboos of the era. At a time when the marriage of an Irish-American Catholic to an Italian-American Catholic could raise hackles in
some quarters, Coffin posed to us a match of the future. What if Caroline Kennedy, the late president's daughter, and Martin Luther King, III, the civil rights leader's son, grew up and decided to marry? Coffin said, he would understand if their families objected. They might object, for example, based on religion. After all, Caroline was a Catholic; Martin a Baptist. But there could be no moral ground for objecting based on race.

My Manhattanville education not only broadened my point of view; it also, gently, broadened my experience. My senior year I joined a group of faculty and students who spent our Saturdays tutoring in one of the most volatile ghettoes of the mid-1960s. In the hour-long drive to the city, I watched as the landscape changed from the luxurious estates that bordered our campus, to the substantial homes of Westchester County, to the modest duplexes and four-plexes of Queens and the Bronx, to the crammed-together apartment buildings of Harlem. As I stepped out of the car for the first time at All Saints Parish, Madison Avenue and 133rd Street, I was keenly aware of being in a part of the city where riots had flared the preceding summer.

I did not need to be frightened. The children who came to the school to be tutored were a delightful lot. I got to work with two first graders: Suzy Black, who gradually overcame her natural shyness, and Carmello Mendoza, my new best friend. Both worked hard at recognizing their numbers and letters and at learning to read and to add and subtract. By the time Christmas rolled around, I was eager to present each of them with a token of my friendship. Suzy thanked me sweetly for her bracelet. Carmello, overjoyed with his new red sweatshirt, wanted me to meet his mom. Despite my protests he pulled me out of the door of the parochial school, across 133rd Street, and into the building where his family lived.

Outside the sky was bright. Inside I could barely see. The air was thick and acrid; it nearly sickened me. A skinny dog with short hair hunkered in a corner of the entryway.
Carmello continued to pull me along -- up the steps, one flight, two flights, three flights, four. Then he burst inside the door of his family's apartment.

What I saw there left me shaken. As Carmello rattled away to his mom in Spanish, she and I checked each other out. She was very slight, not much older than myself, with an infant, and three other very small, hungry-looking children wandering around in a crowded room. We had come in on her while she was ironing. I told her what a great son she had; then let myself out. Walking down the poorly-lit stairwell, I found out why it smelled so bad. Feces and vomit lay on the stairs.

Tutoring in Harlem taught me that I didn't have to fear for MY life there. After all, I could come and go as I pleased. I needed to fear for the kids' lives, for the Suzys and the Carmellos. That they came to school on Saturday, in clean, well-ironed clothes, showed how much their families loved them. How many more happy years would these children enjoy?

My Manhattanville education challenged not only my class and racial biases, but also my religious beliefs. The challenges came not from a single teacher or a single course or a single area of study. Classes in religion, philosophy, political science, literature, biology, and history all figured in the mix. Guest speakers -- who appeared, gave a talk, and left -- played a critical role in enlarging my perspective. So did the films shown on campus on Friday nights.

It was one such film La Dolce Vita, by the Italian director Frederico Fellini, that put the level of my spiritual questions on a whole new plane. I should explain. I arrived at college thoroughly immersed in Catholic practice and dogma. I knew the Baltimore catechism by heart. I had a thorough grounding in the intricacies of the liturgy. I loved singing the exquisite Gregorian chants and the works of such composers as Mozart, Handel, and Bach. But throughout my high school education, any questioning had been repressed. Once as a high
school sophomore I had innocently recommended placing a line from the Gospel of John (8:32) on the strip of corkboard over the blackboard in our classroom. The line read, "The truth shall make you free." That quotation proved too controversial for my high school.

At Manhattanville, however, the administration firmly believed that education differed from indoctrination. The college's role was to draw out of the student that which the student's experience taught her was true. At Manhattanville I was allowed to question core Catholic beliefs. For example, I didn't really accept the transubstantiation, the doctrine that, during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the bread and wine were truly transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Similarly, I doubted the virgin birth, the infallibility of the Pope, and so on and so forth. These were the kind of doubts I had when, in March 1965, at the age of nineteen, I viewed La Dolce Vita.

It was pretty extraordinary that this film was shown on my campus. Although critics considered Fellini one of the most important contemporary European directors, his work was "condemned" by the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency. And it was easy to see why. La Dolce Vita depicted people whose lives consisted of an endless round of drunkenness and debauchery. But the film didn't make me want to join the partygoers. Instead it raised the most disturbing kinds of questions. Was there a God? Did life have a meaning? Why didn't we all do what one of the film's most sensible and sensitive characters did? Murder our children. Kill ourselves. Get done with this shell of a life.

Although I quickly set aside any self-destructive thoughts, I found my faith in the value of life profoundly shattered. It took years to rebuild. Meanwhile, the curriculum at my college assured that my search would be grounded in some of the most important readings the world of religion offers. In addition to snippets of Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian texts, I had rich
exposure to the Old and New Testaments and to such classic Christian thinkers as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Francis Xavier, John Henry Newman, and Karl Barth.

Four writers particularly affected me. I learned from Soren Kierkegaard that reason could take one only so far in trying to determine the existence of a divine being. At some point every believer must make a leap of faith. Didn't the beauty and intricacy of the cosmos suggest that an intelligent force was at work? Why couldn't I make the leap of faith that so many millions had before me?

Kierkegaard's leap of faith had its parallel in the mathematician Blaise Pascal's wager. Pascal said that, if you bet on God and in an afterlife, and it turned out that you were wrong, you lost nothing. But if you bet that death was the end, and you erred, you lost your chance for everlasting happiness. You lost everything.

If Kierkegaard and Pascal encouraged me to turn toward religion, other writers urged me to turn away. As a child, I had learned that God heard every prayer. As an adult and a student of history, I knew that all sorts of human prayers went unanswered. Just think of the tremendous suffering set in motion by two world wars. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, The Brothers Karamazov, the character Ivan expressed my feeling that a world that contained so much suffering could not be the plan of an all-good, all-knowing Creator: "I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong."

The fourth influential text I read was Jean-Paul Sartre's The Flies. This update of a Greek tragedy seemed to encapsulate the spiritual journey I was experiencing. At the play's
climax, the protagonist Orestes tells Zeus, the god of gods, that he used to feel "at one with Nature, this Nature of your making. I sang the praises of the Good -- your Good -- in siren tones, and lavished intimations.... [Then] suddenly, out of the blue, freedom crashed down on me ... and I knew myself alone, utterly alone in the midst of this well-meaning little universe of yours .... There was nothing left in heaven, no right nor wrong nor anyone to give me orders." Zeus counters that the people of Argos don't want Orestes's version of the truth. Zeus says, "You will tear from their eyes the veils I had laid on them, and they will see their lives as they are, foul and futile, a barren boon." Orestes replies that the people of Argos can make whatever they like of his ideas. "[People are] free and human life begins on the far side of despair."

Something held me back from making the leap of faith. It was the sense that there was a challenge just as profound as Christian belief. It was the challenge of learning to accept life on its own terms. It was the effort to piece together meaning out of the choices I make every day, choices that I hope are decent, honest, and fair. I've lived with my own version of the truth for thirty-four years now. For the past twenty-two years I've shared this journey with my husband Clyde Milner and with the members of the Religious Society of Friends. That is, I attend a Quaker meeting. My bringing two children into the world affirms the sense I have gained that life is truly worth living.

I have friends who are convinced and devoted members of a variety of religious groups. I respect them. I respect those for whom the mysteries, rituals, and mysticism of the Catholic Church have meaning. And I will respect each of you, students, as long as the religious path you follow is one you consciously reflect upon and freely choose. Our college years offer us one of our earliest opportunities -- and perhaps one of our only opportunities -- to think about the cosmos and our place in it. I urge you to discover your personal truth.
By the academic year, 1966-67, I had carved out my own identity politically and philosophically. But what would I do with myself once I had left college? How would I go about earning a living? As good as my college was in raising some issues, it dodged the very question you'd think that a girls' school might care about the most. What was my role and what were my rights as a woman? What could I make of myself in the world? What should I try to accomplish? Like any of you, I sought inspiration from the various personal connections I'd made in my life. I read newspapers and articles. I went to career nights. There was one option I knew I didn't have.

Unlike some of my classmates, whose pictures appear in the college yearbook with their left hand carefully positioned to display the diamond engagement ring that graced their finger, I knew I wouldn't marry immediately after college and who knew whether I would at any point thereafter. The social scene for students at single-sex colleges like mine depended heavily on meeting a companion at dances known as "mixers." Way too serious and sensitive, I was a disaster at these events, and blamed myself instead of recognizing their innately demeaning aspect.

So I needed a career. But what could I do? Among my parents' friends and our circle of neighbors, I could count the number of women who held paid positions on one hand. There was Mrs. Chenault, a widow who sold intimate apparel at a major department store. There was Mrs. Connelly, who went to work after her husband suffered a stroke. She served as the secretary for the local superintendent of schools. There was Mrs. Portman, who gave piano lessons and played the organ for a near-by church. She alone of the friends of my family pursued a career even as her husband, also a music teacher, pursued his. I didn't have the knack for nursing. I wasn't attracted to primary or secondary education. I hated the summer I worked as a secretary.
What could I do?

My thoughts turned to law, a field I was quickly dissuaded from entering by an article -- this will surprise you -- in *Mademoiselle Magazine*. The article explained the grim reality for women who attended law school. Even if you were at the top of your class and on the law review, you were still unlikely to receive serious consideration for a position with a major law firm. Don't attend law school, the magazine warned, unless you want to spend your career as a court-appointed lawyer, unless you want to defend crooks for peanuts. Despite my new social consciousness, a career in legal aid did not appeal to me.

I had a fall-back position thanks to two friends of my father. One was in charge of production for *Newsweek*. The other had an equally prominent position at *Time*. I could have gotten an entry-level job at either of these news magazines. A job at either would have made use of my intelligence and put me in the midst of a major New York industry. But I held back. Perhaps my father's presentation of a world in which women did the research for the men who wrote the stories dampened my enthusiasm.

Besides, there was another possibility that intrigued me. One day a brochure from an association of institutions of higher learning passed through my hands as I worked in the acquisitions department of the college library. This brochure ranked the doctoral programs in various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. I wrote down the ratings of the programs in my major, and sent away for graduate application materials from a number of the top universities.

When I broached the subject of applying to graduate school, I got some truly disheartening responses. One of my teachers at Manhattanville, John Lankford, who was just earning a Ph. D. from the University of Wisconsin, discouraged me from applying to major
schools. He called my attention to a mailing from the University of Vermont. It announced the establishment of a brand-new program for a master's in history. Lankford recommended that I apply there. This is what he told me: Even though you're a woman and you'll probably get married and never use your degree, Vermont might be willing to gamble on you; the program there is so new, the faculty are desperate.

My father's response was even more frustrating. When I spoke with him about the subject of schooling beyond Manhattanville, he got excited. He told me that he had always hoped I'd enter the college-grad program at Katherine Gibbs, a secretarial school in New York City. I replied that what I had in mind was doctoral training not secretarial training. Then he really lowered the boom. He warned that I wouldn't get admitted since I'd gone to Catholic schools all my life and wouldn't stack up against the real-world competition.

In spite of these setbacks, I persisted. I decided to apply to the top-ranked American history program, Yale, and to four other programs in the top fifteen: the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, Indiana, and NYU. The Yale application required an essay, "Why Study History?" that I labored over for weeks. Why did I want to study history? My answer was measured. I said that history taught skepticism, how hard it was to know ANYTHING for sure. But it wasn't skepticism that drew me to the subject. Rather, history gave discipline and perspective to my other culture interests. It seemed consistently interesting and important.

In addition to thinking about history, I thought about teaching, and particularly about whether a woman could be an effective college teacher. Out of the twenty-eight teachers I had in college, fourteen were men. They were the teachers that elicited the greatest excitement -- mainly, though not entirely, intellectual -- from the Manhattanville student body. I also took courses from eight women religious or nuns. They were inspiring, intelligent women, but given
the spiritual turmoil I was in, I had difficulty looking to them as role models. I took courses from six other women. A couple of these were more nun-like than the nuns. But there was one woman I studied with at just the right time. It was the fall semester of my senior year in college.

Jane Shapiro was earning a PH. D. in political science at Columbia University when I signed up for her course at Manhattanville on Soviet History and Politics. No older than 30 or 32, she wasn't funny or flashy, but she was well prepared, thorough, and accessible. It came as a surprise to me when I realized that I learned as much in her course as I had in any other. Indeed, it was more than a surprise; it was a revelation. I learned as much from a woman, as I had from any man. Maybe, if I worked at it, I could become as good a teacher as she was.

The following spring I found out that I would indeed get the chance to try my luck at college teaching. My top-choice schools offered me both admission and financial support. Ahead lay more courses, qualifying exams -- both written and oral, and the travail of writing a doctoral dissertation. Ahead lay more political assassinations and more, much more, racial strife. Ahead lay antiwar demonstrations and pressures on girls like me to say "yes" to boys who said "no" to the war and the draft. Ahead lay the temptations of the drug scene. Ahead lay the women's movement and the sense of solidarity it gave me.

But it was at my women's Catholic college, at Manhattanville, that "freedom crashed down on me." It was there that I learned who I was and what I believed in. College had such a profound effect on me that I chose in a sense to never leave it. As a teacher, I hope to broaden your perspective much as my teachers broadened mine.